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## **Book Review: The Digital Divide**

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Abstract: Perhaps because by the 2010s four in five people were using the Internet in many regions of the world, the digital divide appeared fixed. This book, however, is a reminder of the continued social relevance of inequalities in access to, use of, and outcomes of digital information and communication technologies – ‘the problem only starts when everybody has a computer, smartphone or Internet connection!’ (p. 47, emphasis in original). The Digital Divide is next in line in a series of impactful book-length treatments of the subject by Pippa Norris (2001), Mark Warschauer (2003), Jan Van Dijk (2005), and James Witte and Susan Mannon (2010). Van Dijk’s overarching, empirically well-founded diagnosis is that the digital divide reflects and often reinforces social inequality.

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## Book Review

Jan Van Dijk, *The Digital Divide*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020. ISBN 9781509534449

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Perhaps because by the 2010s four in five people were using the Internet in many regions of the world, the digital divide appeared fixed. This book, however, is a reminder of the continued social relevance of inequalities in access to, use of, and outcomes of digital information and communication technologies – ‘the problem *only starts* when everybody has a computer, smartphone or Internet connection!’ (p. 47, emphasis in original). *The Digital Divide* is next in line in a series of impactful book-length treatments of the subject by Pippa Norris (2001), Mark Warschauer (2003), Jan Van Dijk (2005), and James Witte and Susan Mannon (2010). Van Dijk’s overarching, empirically well-founded diagnosis is that the digital divide reflects and often reinforces social inequality.

The book’s nine chapters are each introduced with a structuring question and – based on Van Dijk’s own and many other’s research – usually a clear, textbook-appropriate answer is provided without concealing the findings’ inherent tentativeness. Chapter 1 covers the history of the digital divide as well as its definition and specifics. Chapter 2 is a scoping review of the theories and methods employed in digital divide research, across the three levels – physical access to digital media, digital skills and usage, and outcomes. Here, the reader also finds four theoretical perspectives applicable to the initially descriptive finding of a digital divide starting in 1995. Van Dijk points to the specifics of the relational, socio-cultural, materialist, and acceptance of technology perspective with references to classical sociological texts (Charles Tilly, Max Weber, Pierre Bourdieu, Anthony Giddens, and Everett Rogers). This leads to a cautious (‘with some hesitation I wish to present my own theory,’ p. 30) and summarily presented combined framework: *resources and appropriation theory*.

Chapters 3 through 7 make up the core of the book on the antecedents, characteristics, and consequences of digital media usage divides. *Motivations* for and *attitudes* (chapter 3) towards digital media use have become more positive and usage has increasingly become necessary for societal participation. Van Dijk extends

a basic psychological model of intention formation. For instance, material needs lead to the motive of managing daily life, which leads to the gratification of convenience, making the use of digital media more likely. Differences in resources accrue from personal and positional categories to further determine motivations. The problem of *physical access* (chapter 4) persists, in developing countries as well as in countries with widespread access. Again, empirical research on how resources (social, material, cultural), personal and positional categories (education, age, etc.), and technical aspects (e.g., broadband, mobile) relate to access is detailed. For example, Van Dijk traces shrinking generational but persistent structural age differences using data from the International Telecommunication Union. Critically, this chapter rejects the notion that a trickle-down market mechanism will eliminate the digital divide: digital media technologies require more investment (than did e.g., radio) and what digital inclusion means is constantly shifting.

Various frameworks for *digital skills* (chapter 5) are introduced with Van Dijk's and his long-time collaborator Alexander Van Deursen's approach emphasizing a bipartite structure: medium-related skills (operating digital media) are needed to realize content-related skills (using digital media to achieve goals). A main determinant of digital skills found in surveys and lab studies is educational attainment. *Usage inequality* (chapter 6) exists in varied activities such as Internet banking or video sharing. Digital divide research draws on the logic of the 1970s knowledge gap hypothesis here, but the societal consequences of the Internet usage gap are greater due to digital media's multifunctionality and role in daily life. Van Dijk assumes that the usage gap in social status, rather than in age or gender, will become more salient mainly due to cultural differentiation. Finally, which *outcomes* (chapter 7) does digital media use produce? A list of concrete positive (e.g., finding people with shared interests) and negative outcomes (e.g., being harassed) is compiled with the conclusion that those with greater access, skills, and usage generally benefit more, yet also experience more negative outcomes. Shifting to a more conceptual discussion, chapter 8 invokes the concept of network society, bringing out the sociological relevance: 'it is impossible to close the digital divide without reducing other social inequalities' (p. 131). Chapter 9 then unabashedly concludes the book with solutions to mitigate the digital divide with a global perspective. For example, addressing the digital skills gap will inevitably lead back to educational initiatives beyond equipping schools with tablets.

*The Digital Divide*, for teaching or research, offers an empirically rich and conceptually well-reasoned tour through all steps involved in digital media use and its inequalities. However, many causal interpretations throughout the core chapters are based on cross-sectional survey research; recognizing such methodological limitations is mostly left to the reader. While the first chapter has a section on the misconceptions caused by the divide metaphor, Van Dijk still frequently resorts to this image, e.g., of people being ‘on the right side of the digital divide’ (p. 98). What the field of digital inequality in general has not been able to succinctly conceptualize or empirically demonstrate, is when exactly differences become inequalities. Although addressed in chapter 8, the book cannot entirely remedy this. A short chapter is dedicated to outcomes, yet clearly more research is needed on this third level of digital inequality.

Where Van Dijk has to acknowledge that there are no clear answers, he still poses all the relevant questions and pathways towards answers. A further general achievement of the book is that it showcases the combined application and usefulness of theories: students can retrace how theories generate relevant research questions and how they help interpret empirical patterns of digital media use. The book features eight figures (of 19 in total) that represent causal processes, e.g., of how the four phases of access depend on resources and produce outcomes, which feed back into resources. These models are immensely helpful in making the emergence and consequences of usage gaps apparent. Perhaps further development of Van Dijk’s resources and appropriation theory can consolidate these ‘zoomed in’ views into a comprehensive digital inequality model.